

**Subject: Public Comment: Latino Community OC**

**Date:** Wednesday, May 11, 2011 12:35 PM

**From:** Victor M. Rodriguez [REDACTED]

**To:** <votersfirstact@crc.ca.gov>

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Message Body:

Origin of Latino communities in Orange County

While Mexicans lived in Orange County since the 19th century, it wasn't until the 1930s, when the Citrus industry was an exception to the rest of the state, bogged down by the depression. The county had 51 citrus packing houses and 5,000 growers and large numbers of Mexican workers. Their communities were formed around their agricultural endeavor. Retired UC Irvine professor Gilbert G. González in his classic Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950, explains how at one point more than 75,000 acres of Valencia orange groves covered Orange county, mostly in Brea, La Habra, Anaheim, Orange, Villa Park and sections of Irvine. Latino communities straddled these boundaries because of the focus on the source of employment.

After World War II, large numbers of white Angelenos began to migrate to Orange County, the county then became a bedroom community for those who now, by the freeways constructed could commute to their middle class jobs in Los Angeles.

In the late 1970s, Santa Ana, California became the largest city in the state in which Latinos were the numerical majority. But, despite being the numerical majority, Latinos in this Southern California city have lived in a state of "apartheid" for almost a century, with little access to social, economic, or political power. In Orange County, in the late 1940s "Mexican School" segregated Mexican children until the courts in Mendez v. Westminster stroke down that practice and later the entire state would follow suit.

In the early 1980s, a series of grassroots community organizations in Orange County, led by organizations like Amigos de Orange County and the Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, were able to mobilize naturalized Latino voters, elect the first Latina congresswoman in this county's history, elect the first majority Latino school board in the history of Santa Ana, and increase Latino representation in the city council.

For a century, Latinos had experienced segregation in their neighborhoods and their schools, overt and covert efforts were made to dissuade them from actively participating in the electoral process and Latinos were effectively excluded from entering the economic mainstream of one of the wealthiest counties in the nation. But since the late 1990s, a growing number of Latino voters in Orange County began to enter the political process and began to challenge the political and economic structure and wrest some political inclusion.

One important battle in the empowerment of Latinos and the democratization of California took place in the City of Santa Ana. The demographic changes that took place in the state and Orange County were magnified in Santa Ana. In 1990, 64% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) of the 293,742 residents of Santa Ana were Latino while whites accounted for 23.1% of the total. In the 2000 census, Latinos rose to 71% of the 337,977 residents of Santa Ana although whites declined to only 12.4% of the population. Whites also declined in absolute terms, from 67,897 residents in 1990 to only 41,984 residents of Santa Ana. Santa Ana was the largest city in California where Latinos were the majority. In many

ways, the white minority of Santa Ana lived in the "white islands" described by Maharidge (1996), gated communities, or separate neighborhoods where the class boundaries made it difficult for working-class Latinos to cross. Only the small number of affluent Latinos lived in these white spaces!

es and also shared the white worldview and politics.

According to John Palacio Santa Ana received a large number of Mexican immigrants while Santa Ana began experiencing a process of gentrification during the 1980s. Palacio had worked in the city of Santa Ana in the area of public works assisting the city manager. He had the opportunity of observing city politics and the process of urban development in Santa Ana during the early 1980s. Just like in many urban areas of the nation, housing segregation of communities of color did not take place through restrictive covenants or other legal mechanisms used during the period of de jure segregation, exclusion operated in a more institutional, subtle way.

At least in Santa Ana, one of the reasons for this inequality is that the at-large electoral system in the city gives this small affluent white group a power beyond their numbers. Planning decisions made by public and private groups shaped the landscape of the city of Santa Ana in a racially significant pattern. City policies promoted the building of condos, which expanded the white population while the low-income housing stock continued to diminish.

It is important that the forces that have shaped Latino communities are understood and taken into account, otherwise, shaping new boundaries will divide "natural" communities with shared interests which will not find public expression in the electoral system. In the end, that is what democracy is all about.

Victor M. Rodriguez, Professor and former Chair Department of Chicano and Latino Studies, California State University, Long Beach. Author of Latino Politics in the U.S.: Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender in the Mexican American and Puerto Rican Experience. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 2005

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